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## NOTES ON THIEF TALK.

SOME years ago, as the special correspondent of a leading paper in New York, we were called upon to write on all sorts of subjects, the range of which reached from the biography of Mrs. Mary Ann Nelson, the heroic peanut woman of New Orleans — this was, in fact, a history of epidemics in the South — to an exhaustive article on Louisiana state finances.

Naturally, in pursuit of all sorts of information, we had to go to some very strange places, and, in the course of business, had to see some very strange people. One day we were sitting with one of the most desperate characters that our city has produced, — a man who died in our streets, like most of his victims, literally with the boots on, — when a very modest little volume lying on a centre table attracted attention. Taking it up, it was found to be entitled, “Vocabulum, or the Rogue’s Lexicon, compiled from the most authentic sources by George W. Matsell, Special Justice, Chief of Police, etc., etc. Published by George W. Matsell & Co., proprietors of the National Police Gazette, No. 3 Tryon Row, New York. 1859.”

Here was a matter of particular interest, and this was intensified when a glance at the book revealed the still more singular fact, that a number of these thief words were pure Anglo-Saxon. And so the question followed: “Are these words actually used in the conversation of thieves?” The person interrogated smiled (evidently at our ignorance), and answered in the affirmative. Subsequent interviews with some of the best officers on our police force fully confirmed this.

Not long since, we had the pleasure of meeting one of the best as well as oldest detectives in our country, — a man who has followed his profession for fully half a century, and who is now at the head of his department in our city. On making some inquiries in regard to the words in Matsell’s “Vocabulum,” he stated that all of these were, or had been, thief words, and with few exceptions were in actual use with the most accomplished *cracksmen* at the present time. Going to a bookcase, the detective took down a copy of Matsell’s book. Turning to the Advertisement on page 129, he said: “This is a fair specimen of our Cant or Flash, and all the words we see here may be considered as standard words in this *patter*, and are really spoken now.” Out of a total of one hundred and seventy-three words contained in the Advertisement, not counting duplicates or repetitions, we found that thirty-nine were thief words, making an average of twenty-one and a half per cent., leaving a balance of seventy-seven and a half per cent. of words which are perfectly good English.

The most notable feature of American thief talk is its appropriation of *English rhyming slang*. To be sure, the extent of this appropriation is not very great; still in no other tongue, so far as my knowledge extends, does a single word of rhyming cant appear. This seems strange, as such words are especially fitted for the purpose of deception, and their absence from all neo-Latin languages, to which it seems that they ought especially to belong, is something not readily explained.

It may be further noticed, that by far the greater part of the words in Matsell's book are taken from the oldest English of the lexicons. When the American is obliged to reform his vocabulary, for reasons best known to himself, he takes what he requires from English provincialisms, Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, or else he utters the Old English thief words in the strangest manner conceivable. Nor is this a novelty, since a number of these oddities are to be found in the earliest vocabularies of American cant which we have, namely, in the glossaries of Tufts and Mount.

In Matsell's "Vocabulum" abbreviations are numerous; *e. g.* *Hash*, to vomit, the last sound in the expression, *Flash the hash*, to vomit, which is to be found in Egan's *Grose*, 1823. *Hatches*, in distress, short for *under the hatches*, in trouble, which appears in *Grose's "Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue,"* 1785. *Leg*, a gambler, evidently an abbreviation of *Black-legs*, a gambler, or sharper on the turf or in the cockpit, given in *Grose*.

Not only do abbreviations abound in Matsell's book, but these are also misprinted, or (more probably) perverted intentionally, *e. g.* *Slavey*, a female servant. In Parker's "Life's Painter of Variegated Characters," 1789, p. 144, we have *Molly Slavey*, a maid servant.

In Matsell's "Vocabulum" not only do we find the strangest hybrids, *i. e.* the union of English and foreign words, but the position of these in a sentence, according to the rules of English composition, is often reversed; *e. g.* *Virtue-ater*, a prostitute, where *ater* is evidently the Greek "without." *Virtue* of course is English, and a woman without virtue must be the character mentioned.

In Matsell's compilation it is also to be noticed, that complete changes have been made in words or expressions, as well as in definitions given in the old vocabularies, from which these words or expressions were taken; *e. g.* "Rocked in a stone cradle." In *Grose's "Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue,"* we have *rocked*; "he was rocked in a stone kitchen,"—a saying meant to convey the idea that the person was a fool, his brain having been disordered by the movement of his cradle.

In Matsell's book, changes in definition—the words to which they are attached remaining unaltered—are almost innumerable,

and it is therefore unnecessary to give any of these. But still stranger liberties are taken with the words than with their definitions,—letters being added or omitted. *Daub*, says Matsell, is a ribbon. *Dobbin*, says Parker, *op. cit.*, 1789, is a ribbon.

In Matsell we find some remarkable substitutions of one word for another. A notable example is *switched*, defined to mean married. Here it would seem that the American had railroad talk in his head, and so his idea of being married was, to be switched off. The English *swished* is to be found in Egan's *Grose*, 1823.

In Matsell we find some strange additions to the actual signification of words, *e. g.* "*Tace*. A candle." The following appears in *Grose*: "*Tace*. Silence, hold your tongue. *Tace* is Latin for a candle; a jocular admonition to be silent on any subject." *Ed.* 1788. Now this jocular admonition the American rogue thinks proper to take as an actual definition; hence *tace*, a candle.

When our American thinks proper to be original, his inventions are almost as remarkable as his perversions and improvements. Among these may be found *to smite*, signifying to drink, apparently from the effect,—water *not* being understood; *stop*, a detective officer; *subside*, defined to mean get out of the way, run away; *sucked*, cheated, etc., etc.

Matsell's vocabulary contains, by count, 2,161 words. Our notes would explain nearly all of these. What follows is simply a selection.

*Contractions.*—(M.) Matsell's Vocabulum. (H.) A Caveat or Warening for Common Cursetors vulgarely called Vagabones. By Thomas Harman, Esquire, 1567. (New Dict.) A new Dictionary of the terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew. By B. C., Gent. London: [no date, 1699-1700]. (G.) *Grose's Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, eds. 1785, 1788, 1790. (E. G.) *Grose's Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, revised and corrected by Pierce Egan. London: 1823. (R.) *The Regulator, or a Discovery of Thieves, Thief-Takers, and Locks, alias Receivers of Stolen Goods, in and about the City of London.* By a Prisoner in Newgate. London: 1718.

*Adam.* An accomplice,—in compliment to the original man, who was the first accomplice.

*Albert.* A chain. In 1849, the jewellers of Birmingham presented Prince Albert with a watch chain. Hence *Albert*. Not in English Cant glossaries.

*Altemal.* All in a heap, without separation. "*Altemall*. All together." *New Dict.* Dutch accounts are said to be presented without items. (*Altemael*, Dutch, meaning all together.)

*Amerace.* Very near, don't go too far, be within call. (It would seem as if this word might be a misprint for *Ames Ace*, which occurs in *Grose* with this sense.—*Ed.*)

*Autum.* A church. In H., 1569, this is written *Autem*. Old  
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French, *Antif* ou *Anti*, feminine *antive*, "était une épithète, qu'au xiii<sup>e</sup> et au xiv<sup>e</sup> siècle on donnait, comme *autain*, *autaine*, aux constructions dont la physiognomie ressemblait à celle des églises." Michel, "Etudes de philologie comparée sur l'argot," 1856. This word is now represented in modern *argot*.

*Bam*. A lie. To bamboozle, humbug, — in G., 1785. (From Italian verb *bamboleggiare*, to trifle.)

*Bardy*. A sixpence. (Found nowhere else, as far as our knowledge extends. *Bard* is still old Scotch for beggar, vagrant. Cassell & Co.'s "Encyclopædic Dictionary," 1888. *Bardy* may be a diminutive. A beggarly sixpence, as we all know, is proverbial. Hence perhaps *bardy*.)

*Ben*. A vest. (An abbreviation of *benjy*, which appears in the "Life of David Haggart," written by himself, while under sentence of death, 1821.)

*Bender*. A spree, or drunken frolic. Native American. Has no relation to *bender*, as it appears in E. G., 1823. (The derivation is obvious.)

*Bingo*. Liquor. "Bingo, C. Brandy." New Dict., 1699. (In Persian we have *bang*, hemp, and also an intoxicating liquor made out of the leaves of hemp, from which this word might possibly be derived.)

*Black Act*. Picking locks. "Black Art. Cant. The art of picking a lock." G., 1785.

*Bloke*. A man.

*Boke*. The nose. "The Slang Dictionary," London, 1873, has *Boke*, a nose, and says it was originally pugilistic slang, but now general.

*Bolt*. To run away. G., 1785.

*Bone*. To take, to steal, to ask him for it. New Dict., 1699, has this word with all the above definitions except the last.

*Boodle*. A quantity of bad money. *Bodle* is a Scotch coin, less in value than the *Bawbee*, being one sixth part of a penny. "Not worth a bawbee" is proverbial; so "not worth a bodle" would seem to express something even more insignificant. *Boodle* nowadays is good coin which is only figuratively and morally bad.

*Booze*. Intoxicating drink. *Bowse*, drink. H., 1667.

*Bouny*. A purse. H. (A. S., *Pung*, a purse.)

*Bubble*. To cheat. "Bubb or bubble. C. One that is cheated." New Dict.

*Bufe*. A dog. H.

*Buffer*. A pugilist.

*Bugging*. Taking money from a thief, on the part of a policeman. ("Bugging. C. Taking money by bailiffs and sergeants of the defendant not to arrest him." New Dict., 1699.

*Bummer.* A sponger. American only, I believe.

*Bun.* A fellow that cannot be shaken off. "*Burre.* A hanger-on or dependent; an allusion to the field burrs, which are not easily shaken off." New Dict., 1699. *Bun* would seem to be a perversion or misprint.

*Bustled.* Confused, perplexed, troubled, puzzled.

*Can.* A dollar. Evidently a peculiar American abbreviation of *Canary Bird*, a guinea. G., 1785. The term would seem applicable to the gold dollar in use at the time of Matsell's writing.

*Cap Bung.* Hand it over; give it to me. Apparently another original Americanism. (*Cap* would seem to be abbreviation of Lat. *capere* and *bung.* See above. *Cap bung* would seem to mean, reach the purse.)

*Captain Toper.* A smart highwayman. Not found elsewhere, we believe. *Toper* seems to be a perversion of *toby*. "To toby a man is to rob him on the highway. A person connected with this offence is said to be done for a toby. The toby applies exclusively to robbing on horseback, the practice of footpad robbery being properly called the 'spice,' though it is common to distinguish the former by the title of high toby, and the latter low toby." E. G., 1823.

*Cap your lucky.* Another American invention, apparently. (From *capere* and *luck*.)

*Carler.* A clerk. Not in English cant, as far as we know.

*Carrel.* Jealous. A misprint or perversion for *Carvel*, who was jealous. So says G., 1785.

*Cass.* Cheese. American abbreviation of *Cassan*, cheese, in H., 1567.

*Caved.* Gave up. American. Now slang.

*Charley.* A gold watch. Another American invention. "Charley, a watchman." E. G., 1823. The American rogue cuts this definition in half, and makes the term to mean a gold watch.

*Chates.* Gallows. "Chattes, the gallowses." H., 1569.

*Chatts.* Lice. "Chatt, a louse." So New Dict., 1699. It may be noted here, as a singular fact, that the rogue invariably expresses everything in the most delicate manner possible. Any number of examples of this might be given.

*Cherry pipe.* A pipe; a full-grown woman. Perversion of English rhyming slang. *Cherry ripe*, a pipe. The full-grown woman is an American addition.

*Chin.* A child. American abbreviation of greasy chin. G., 1785. (See under *Grease*.)

*Chive.* A file or saw. "*Chive*, C., a knife." New Dict., 1699. (Gipsy *chivomengro*, letter, lawyer, knife.)

*Chovey.* A shop or store. Not English cant, though used by English costermongers.

*Clear.* Run, go away, be off. American abbreviation of *clear out*.

*Cleymans.* Artificial sores made by beggars in order to impose upon the credulous. "*Cleymes*, C. Sores without pain raised on beggars' bodies, by their own artifice and cunning (to move charity), by bruising crowsfoot, speerwort, and salt together and clapping them on the place, which frets the skin, then with a linnen rag, which sticks close to it, they tear off the skin, and strew on it a little Powder'd Arsnick, which makes it look angrily or ill favoredly, as if it were a real Sore." New Dict., 1699.

*Cocum.* Sly, wary.

*Commit.* To inform.

*Copped.* Arrested. Not in English thief talk apparently.

*Cove.* A man. *Cofe*, a person. H., 1567.

*Crack.* To force, to burst open. G., 1785, "to break."

*Cracksman.* A burglar who uses force instead of picklocks or false keys. "A housebreaker." E. G., 1823.

*Cramped.* Killed; murdered. Apparently an American perversion. "*Crapped*, hanged (Cant)." G., 1785.

*Crib.* A house. "Crib, a mean house; also, a bed." "Life of David Haggart," 1823.

*Crokus.* A doctor. "*Crocus*, or *Crocus metallorum*, a nickname for the surgeons of the army and navy." G., 1785.

*Crossleite.* To cheat a friend. Apparently another American perversion. "*Crossbite*, C., to draw in a friend, yet snack with the Sharpes." New Dict., 1699.

*Cross fanning.* Picking a pocket with the arms folded across the chest. Another peculiar American misprint or perversion. *Fanning*, it would seem, should be *faming*, from *fams*, hands.

*Cues.* The points. No longer thief talk, we believe, but theatre slang, answering to catchword, hint, intimation.

*Cuffir.* A man. "Cuffin, C., a man." New Dict., 1699. "*Cuffen*, a manne." H., 1567.

*Culing.* Snatching reticules. Another American expression not found in English cant. (Derivation from the last syllable of reticule.

*Curlers.* Fellows who sweat gold coins by putting them in a bag, and, after violently shaking, gather the dust. (French ropemakers use the word *curle* to express whirl.)

*Curbinglaw.* Stealing goods out of windows. "Curbing law, to hook goods out of windows. (Cant.) The curber is the thief, the curb the hook." G., 1785. (May not *law* be a perversion of *lay*, q. v. ?)

*Cussine.* A mule. (An attempt at the French *Coussin*. For an explanation of derivation, see *Cushion*, in Grose, 1785.)

*Cut bene.* Pleasant words; to speak kindly. "To cut bene whyddes, to speak, or give good words." H., 1667.

*Cutting-his-eyes.* Beginning to see; learning; suspicious. Another singular perversion. In G., 1788, we have "To cutty-eye, to look out the corner of one's eyes; to leer; to look askance. 'The cull cutty-eyes at us;' the fellow looked suspicious at us."

*Daisy-roots.* Boots and shoes. Daisy roots, a pair of boots. English rhyming slang.

*Danan.* Stairs. An American perversion of *Dancers*, stairs.

*Daub.* A ribbon. "Dobbin," says Parker's "Life's Painter," 1789, "is a ribbon."

*Deek the cove.* See the fellow. Not in English thief talk, as far as we know.

*Done.* Convicted. "Done or done over; robbed; also convicted or hanged. Cant." G., 1788.

*Dopey.* A thief's mistress. G., 1785.

*Dookin.* — *Cove.* A fortune-teller. Not found in English Cant. (*Dukkerin* is Gypsy for fortune-telling.)

*Funk.* To frighten. "*Funk*, vox Academicis Oxon. familiaris." To be "in funk vett. Flandris fonck est Turba, perturbatio; in de fonck siin, Turbari, tumultuari, in perturbatione versari." L. Junius, "Etymologicum Anglicanum."

*Gaff.* A theatre, a fair. E. G., 1823. "The old terms of giff-gaff. It is just niffer for niffer." Walter Scott in "The Fortunes of Nigel."

*Galligaskin.* A pair of breeches. G., 1785. "Galligaskins, q. d., caligae Gallo Vasconicae, called because the *Vascones* used such instead of Spatterdashers, a sort of wide Slops used by the inhabitants of Gascoign in France." Bailey, "Universal Etymological English Dictionary," ed. 1790.

*Gammon.* To deceive. E. G., 1823. "Gammon and Patter is the language of cant, spoke among themselves; when one of them speaks well, another says he gammons well, or he has got a great deal of rum patter." Parker's "Life's Painter," 1789. "A Bull or Gammon, *alias* that is he that jostles up to a man, whilst another picks his pocket, and no sooner got (*sic*) his Booty but tips it, *alias* gives it to his Bull or Gammon." "The Regulator," 1718.

*Gelter.* Money. A very familiar expression. *Out of kelter* is nothing more or less than out of *gelter*, *i. e.* money. In Parker's "Life's Painter," 1789. (A perversion of German *geld*?)

*German flute.* A pair of boots. English rhyming slang.

*Glibe.* Writing. "*Gybe*, a writing," H., 1567, of which this is a perversion.

*Gonnoff.* A thief who has attained to the higher walks of his profession.

*Gorger.* A gentleman; a well-dressed man. (The S. D., 1873,



derives this word from "gorgeous." Perhaps from *Gorjer*, Eng. Gypsy for Englishman, stranger, alien, gentile; any one not a Gypsy.)

*Half-a-hog*. A five-cent piece. In New Dict., 1699, we find "*Halfhord*, C., sixpence," and this may have suggested "Half a hog."

*Hams*. Pants. "*Hams* or Ham cases, breeches." G., 1785.

*Hang bluff*. Snuff. The original is the English rhyming slang *Harry bluff*, of which *hang bluff* is either a misprint or perversion.

*Hang it up*. Think of it; remember it. "*Hang it up*, speaking of a reckoning; score it up." G., 1785.

*Hare it*. Return; come back. Apparently American only.

*Hash*. To vomit. "The last word in the expression, 'Flash the hash,' *i. e.* vomit." E. G., 1823.

*Heaver*. The breast or chest of a person. "*Heaver*, C., a breast." New Dict., 1699.

*Heavers*. Persons in love. Derivation evident. "*Heavers*, thieves who make it their business to steal tradesmen's shop books. Cant." G., 1788. *Heavers* continued to mean thieves down to 1823, if not later. See E. G., 1823.

*Herring*. Bad. "*Herring*. The devil a barrel the better herring, all equally bad." G., 1788.

*Hollow*. Certain; a decided beat. "*Hollow*. It was not quite a hollow thing; *i. e.* certainty or decided business." G., 1788.

*Horness*. Watchman. (Evidently a perversion of *hornies*, constables, watchmen, and peacemakers, in Parker's "Life's Painter," 1781. (Derivation from *horn*, because they *hooked* people.)

*Hummer*. A great lie. New Dict., 1699, defines this "a loud lie; a rapper." In the little book just quoted, we have also *hum cap*, old, mellow, and very stout beer; also *hum* or *humming* liquor, double ale; stout. In "Street Robberies Consider'd," London (no date), written by a converted thief, we find *hum*, strong. According to this, *hum* in *humbug* may not come from the verb to hum, but from the adjective, as above given.

*William Cumming Wilde.*

EDITOR'S NOTE. — The proof of this article did not meet the eyes of its author. Major William Cumming Wilde, of New Orleans, La., in which city he was widely known, died November 4, 1890, in the country, to which he had retired after his marriage, which had taken place two months before. Major Wilde took particular interest in the study of the singular dialects which are proper to thieves and vagabonds, and with regard to the origin of English cant, in particular, held views sufficiently indicated by an article which has appeared in this Journal (vol. ii. p. 301). The modest and gentle character, as well as the intelligence of the writer, endeared him to many friends, by whom he will long be remembered.